

The Finnish Class War 1918

A brief piece explaining that the Finnish Civil War of 1918 was, contrary to rightist claims, in fact, a class war.

Translator's notes:

This unsigned article originally appeared in *Kapinatyöläinen* #13, 1993. The original title of the piece is "Luokkasota 1918" which translates plainly to Class War 1918, I have for clarification changed this to The Finnish Class War 1918, as well as adding my own footnotes.

*Frimod Fredriksson,
Finland, June 2012.*

The Finnish Class War 1918

At the end of January the 75th anniversary of the Finnish Civil War was celebrated. The media often quite correctly called this the anniversary of the "freedom war", while however confusing those who fought for freedom with their enemies.

On the 27th January 1918 the Finnish working class rose against the upper class to take power for themselves, so in the countryside as in the cities. Their aim was to emancipate themselves from economic misery and create a just and equal society. At the same time under the lead of Mannerheim¹ the government's military operations aiming to disarm the Russians and the workers' red guards started from Ostrobothnia². By this the government sought to strengthen its own authority and suppress the increasingly eager working class movement.

When not talking about simply "restoring the order", attempts have been made to claim the battle for independence as the aim of the white side³. Soviet-Russia had however already recognized Finnish independence 31.12.1917⁴ and the Russian troops in the country (about 40 000 men) could hardly have constituted any real threat to independence. As elsewhere in the Russian army, the soldiers were only waiting to get home and obeyed orders only if they felt them to be reasonable. The continuation of the Russian-German war, however, made the Bolsheviks reluctant to withdraw troops from Finland.

Still the white leaders were already during the war propagating the war as a "crusade against the Russians", after all they largely had to make up their troops of smallholders, who didn't necessarily have any interest in slaughtering workers and peasants. However Mannerheim sometimes slipped from this line and declared to Russian soldiers (and before all to the Russian officers, of whom he had himself until recently been one⁵) that he fought solely against the Finnish rebels. In fact, many Russian officers were supporting the Whites, a group of Russian military pilots with their planes even flew in to aid the bourgeois.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war Lenin and company decided to demobilize the whole army - the loyalty of the soldiers was questionable - and only about 2000 Russians, who voluntarily decided to fight side by side with the Finnish workers, were left in Finland (it should also be mentioned that a group of a few hundred Russian anarchist sailors fought with

the reds). So the Russian's part in the battles is rather futile, taking into account that all in all about 100 000 men and women fought on the red side.

The most important battle in the war took place in and around Tampere⁶ and ended in victory for the whites, and in the conquest of Tampere 2.4. Right after this the German troops (about 12 000 soldiers) that the government had called for took land in Hanko and Loviisa⁷, attacking the reds from behind and conquering Helsinki⁸ 12-13.4. The war ended at the start of May as the last reds surrendered near Lahti⁹.

In its last phases the war acquired the traits of a downright massacre of workers. People considered reds were shot on the spot, often without any investigations. While about 3500 whites and 5500 reds fell in the war, the whites executed about 8400 reds (the reds respectively shot 1650 whites). Furthermore about 12 000 who had been on the red side died in the concentration camps¹⁰ of the whites during the spring and summer. So all in all more than 25 000 workers lost their lives (the population of Finland at this time was slightly over 3 millions).

In hindsight it is easy to mention several reasons for the failure of the revolution. One of the most important was, however, the unpreparedness of the working class for revolution. The leadership of the working class movement was concentrated on parliamentary action and it was mainly concerned with getting votes. Although the words of the leaders may have been revolutionary, in reality even the radicals were lost when a revolutionary situation emerged. The rank and file on the other hand drove the movement forward, set up red guards (often despite their leaders resistance), went on strike and demanded revolution. The problem was however, that the workers were used to waiting for answers and directions from the leaders, as in marxian movements in general. During the general strike of 1917¹¹ the worker's guards were running the show in large parts of the country and the working class demanded that power be taken by the workers movement. The leaders of the movement got scared, though, and compelled the workers to return to work, in part by deploying obvious lies. This couldn't stop the revolution, but when it came a couple of months later, the bourgeoisie were prepared. The lesson is that the working class should not demand someone to make the revolution, but make it themselves.

The war was an even bigger loss mentally than physically for the workers. Even if there was much to criticize in the social democratic party of the beginning of the century, it was still an obviously true working class movement, not as much a political organization as a unified movement for working class emancipation. After the war this working class movement split. A group of red leaders who had fled to Moscow founded the Communist Party of Finland¹², which loyally walked on the leash of the Soviet Union until the Finnish government started offering it's leaders leading positions. Leaders of the working class movement who silently had stayed in Finland, or even taken up positions on the white side, on the other hand, re-established the Social Democratic Party of Finland, which made an art of cheating workers and licking bourgeoisie ass¹³.

Another lesson of the class war of 1918 is that the Finnish people have not always been contented to just complaining, but that it has also fought, arms in hand, for it's rights. The past 75 years have only made the ruling class cocky...

- ¹ Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, appointed leader of the whites, later commander in chief of the Finnish army and President of Finland. To this day regarded by the right

as a hero, while the left consider him responsible for the mass slaughter of working class people during the war. -F.F.

- [2.](#) Region on the west coast of Finland. -F.F.
- [3.](#) It remains, in fact, a surprisingly common belief in Finland to this day that the war was simply a question of the whites wanting an independent country and the reds opposing this. -F.F.
- [4.](#) The Finnish government had declared itself independent on the 6th December, initially seeking recognition from the whites in Russia, who however refused it, insisting on a large unified Russia, so the government reluctantly had to turn to the reds, who with Lenin's approval recognised Finland as independent on the 31st December. -F.F.
- [5.](#) Mannerheim served almost 30 years in the Russian army, taking part in both the Russian-Japanese war of 1904 and World War One. -F.F.
- [6.](#) The city of Tampere was considered a stronghold of the reds. -F.F.
- [7.](#) Cities on the south coast of Finland. -F.F.
- [8.](#) Capital of Finland. -F.F.
- [9.](#) City located about 100 kilometers north of Helsinki. -F.F.
- [10.](#) Up until recent years the existence of these camps have been denied in Finland, but the evidence of their existence is indisputable, and diaries and memoirs of surviving red prisoners are starting to be published. It is still a very sensitive subject for sympathisers of the whites and the government. -F.F.
- [11.](#) The general strike of 1917 lasted from the 14th to the 19th November, during this time the red guards tried to disarm the white guards, and arrested enemies of the working class. Clashes were sometimes violent and I have seen estimates ranging from 12 to 34 deaths during the unrests of the strike. -F.F.
- [12.](#) SKP - Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue. The party was banned by law in Finland until 1944, and disbanded in the 90's. A small 80's offshoot of the party then took up the name SKP and continues action to this day, but as of yet hasn't had any representatives in the parliament, although it has a few municipal councillors. -F.F.
- [13.](#) These traitors of the working class has for a long time been one of the biggest parties in Finnish politics, carrying out bourgeois politics while claiming to represent the workers. -F.F.